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THE SERVICE

OF THE

Public Library to the Community

BY

REV. S. H. HOWE, D. D.,

NORWICH.

AN ADDRESS BEFORE

The Bill Library Association, of Ledyard, Conn.,

AUGUST 31, 1904.

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NEXT to the planting of Christianity in a community, the supreme blessing that can be bestowed upon that community is the provision of a Public Library. This community is to be felicitated upon the possession of this supreme blessing. Especially is this community to be felicitated on the fact that this provision has been made by its own children. The public library is often the gift of a stranger. This community is happy in the fact that it has received its library from one whom it has nourished and sent forth into the world, and who in the spirit of filial gratitude was willing to accept the responsibility of providing for his native town what is sure to be of incalculable benefit to this and to coming generations.

The founding of public libraries has become a distinct and preeminent form of modern philanthropy. The public library is the consummate flower and the supreme expression of our best civilization. The founders of public libraries are the world's best benefactors. No better public service can be rendered than that of putting the world's best thinking within the reach of one's fellow men. The library is the sign of a true civilization. It is said of the African chief whom Livingstone brought to London that he understood and to a degree appreciated every thing he saw of the shrines of religion and of the marts of trade in that most splendid city of the world except its libraries. There was nothing in his precedent experience that helped him to understand a library. His

9
Howe

race and region of the earth were without a history. For the rude thinking of his people there was no means of preservation; hence those vast crystallizations of the history and thinking of the world's libraries were utterly unintelligible to him. To the savage who writes no books the world's past and the life and achievements of contemporary nations are a blank. But the civilized man through books gathers all the history, and all the best thinking of the world to his fireside. Books enshrining the best thought, and the most inspiring experience of the world, are the open windows through which man looks out upon past and contemporary life. Books thus are both the signs of civilization and the means unto civilization; the chief working force unto the highest civilization. When Mathew Arnold visited us, he said our country lacked interest for him because he found nothing finished, while the older countries of Europe had completed so many of their tasks. But that is the point in which this country is made supremely interesting to us. We have so many things in hand; we are a nation in the making. We are fashioning a great people into fitness for its mission to humanity; and because we are in this formative state it is that libraries can take so large a function to the nation. Books are building forces to the nation, without which there can be no great national life. A reading people is a progressive people, self contained, self controlled, and self defended, against those anarchic forces which make tools of the ignorant. The mob is never recruited from the reading public. So that it is the instinct of the

noblest patriotism that founds the public library and creates a reading public. A reading people will be both a cultured and a patriotic people. It will not only develop a spirit that holds them loyal to local interests, but it will develop universal sympathies and world-wide interests. A good library makes the reader a citizen of the world, and the contemporary of the peoples of all times and ages. Wide reading makes narrowness and provincialism impossible; in the act of throwing back the horizon of vision it widens and broadens all the foundations of life. Wise reading universalizes the reader and delivers him from the pent up Uticas to which the unreading man dooms himself. A carefully selected library represents, preserves and perpetuates the best thinking and the more important ongoings of the world. A collection of books Carlyle tells us "is a real university." Books are the truest preservers and immortalizers of the greatest things that men have thought and done. Men have painted their great conceptions in pictures and carved them in stone, or built them in temples or enshrined them in cities, but time at last obliterates their work. The mighty artists of the ancient world are only represented to us in fragments, broken statues, and crumbling columns, but books preserve the people's enacted history and the noble thinking of their authors forever. But for books the woven fabric of these mighty looms of time would have been unravelled as fast, all but, as they were woven and would have perished. But a library like that of Paris with its two and a half millions of volumes, or the British Museum with its million and a

half volumes, or that at Washington with its three-quarters of a million, how completely in these and others of a similar character all the best thinking and achievements of the race are preserved. When you enter these libraries all the great spirits of history rise up to greet you and gather about you. All the notable ongoing of the world pass before you ; the world's greatest history gets fresh enactment ; the poets sing to you ; the philosophers gather you for the time into the group of their disciples ; the scientists draw aside the veils which conceal from unpracticed eyes the mysteries of nature ; the artists display the finely fashioned forms in which they have given shape to their dreams of beauty ; the inventors put you into the secrets of all their discoveries ; the travellers lend you their eyes and let you see the wonders proximate or remote of continents you cannot yourself visit. The carefully selected librarian annihilates time and space to you ; obliterates racial and continental boundaries, breaks up your narrow provincialism, and makes you a citizen of the world and a contemporary of every age. With books you can domesticate yourself in the age of Homer or of Caesar of Abraham and of David and of Jesus. The old nations rise at the touch of their wand. Egypt will come from her rocky tombs ; Asia will become populous with the life of her oldest periods ; Europe will take on the stir and rustle of her steel clad armies or be made alive with the industries and the activities of her earliest ages ; the old world will be rehabilitated in all the forms of its ancient life and live again, for you, here at the beginning of this twentieth century. When we recall all

the magnificent service books render us in preserving the past, in interpreting the present, in forecasting the future; and in appealing to and eliciting the powers of reflection and of action, we need not be surprised at the reverence and the gratitude which the greatest men have brought to the great books and their authors. "What a place to be in," wrote Charles Lamb, of the famous library of Oxford; "it seems as though all the souls of all the writers that have bequeathed their labors to these Bodleians were reposing here in some dormitory of the middle state. I do not want to handle the leaves, their winding sheets; I could as soon dislodge a shade. I seem to inhale learning, walking amid their foliage, and the odor of their old moth-scented coverings is fragrant as the first bloom of those scintial apples which grew amid the happy orchard." Machiavelli tells us in a letter how after passing the day at his country house in rustic outdoor labor he returns home to shut himself in his study; but before making his appearance in it, taking care out of respect to his authors to remove his rustic garb and putting on a dress adapted to courts and cities. "Thus fitly habited," he tells us, "I enter the antique resorts of the ancients, where, being received, I feed on that food which alone is mine and for which I was born, feeling no annoyance, forgetting every grief, fearing neither poverty nor death." Thus totally immersed and lost to the world in his absorption with the companionship of the great spirits of all time. "By my books," writes a scholar, "I can conjure up to vivid existence all the great and good men of antiquity, and for my individual satis-

faction I can make them act over again the most renowned of their exploits. The orators declaim for me; the historians recite; the poets sing; in a word, from the equator to the pole and from the beginning of time until now, by my books I can fly whither I please." You remember Southey's pathetic and reverent love for his books, how he would leave his library with as formal a "Good Night" as if he was leaving a company of savants. And how in advanced age and failing faculties he would pass along the shelves and alcoves laying his hands affectionately on the works of favorite authors as we do upon the shoulders of familiar friends. And this is not strange for among books one is as some one has said "in the very lap of eternity, among so many divine souls." "In books," says Carlyle, again, "lies the soul of the whole past, the articulate voice of the past when the body and material substance of it has vanished like a dream; all that mankind has done, thought, gained or been is lying in magic preservation in the pages of books." And if we have the instinct of reverence the place which contains them becomes a holy shrine

"And the heart runs o'er
With silent worship of the great of old,
The dead, but sceptered sovereigns who still rule
Our spirits from their urns."

And this high estimate of books is not the prerogative of the great and learned alone, for books take the same office to the humblest that they take to the great. The great authors do not look you up in the books of heraldry or scrutinize the carvings about your door lintels, or ask questions about your family history before

they will enter your doors and lay claim to your leisure moments. The great authors are not reserved in their service or exclusive in the selection of their company. No matter what be our setting in life, all the master spirits of history will come in shining garments and gather for brotherly fellowship with us about our evening lamp. Your life may be one of drudgery ; you may be grinding in the hard mills of routine ; you may be treading the dulllest paths of monotony and commonplace ; you may have hardship in your lot and trouble may be dogging your steps like a sleuth-hound, but if you have cultivated that easily acquired habit of reading, you can slip your tether and get away from it all when your evening lamp is lighted and the work of the day is done. If you willingly invite them you can have the company of all the inspired and inspiring spirits of history, and if you will only allow them, they will snatch you away from your unsavory environment and bear you away to worlds new to you. The historians, touching the past with their wizard's wand, will bring all the world's yesterdays back again, the scientists will show you a fairy land in these fields of nature which are commonplace to you ; the philosophers will relieve you of the necessity of the original initiative, and reason out for you the difficult problems of life and destiny ; the discoverers and explorers will conduct you to the heart of distant continents ; you can travel with Livingstone and Nansen and Burton over lands you can never see. In a word, with a taste for reading acquired, a public library at your command, and a little leisure at your service, and the monotony and

the dreary solitude of existence are at an end. A man who can make daily companions of Shakespeare and Milton and of Dante, of Scott and of Thackeray, of Tennyson and of Browning, of Agassiz and of Tyndal, of Gibbon and of Prescott, should not complain of the monotony and humdrum of existence. Give me a book and a June day said Emerson and I can make the pomp of kings ridiculous. We may have rude surroundings and we may be annoyed by the shallow coarse talk of the people around us, but nothing can hinder us from listening to the pure English undefiled of Addison or the stately speech of Milton or the liquid legend music of Tennyson. We may live under a lowly roof; our clothes may be the worse for wear; our tables may be spread with little that would tempt the appetites of the rich Dives' or the haughty Sir Gold Dusts of the world, but with the opened doors of the public library nothing can prevent us from having the constant and familiar society of all the wise savants, the singing poets and the profound philosophers who have long found their niches among the immortals.

And then the amount of time at your command is not so great a consideration as at first thought might appear. The odd minutes which many of us throw away, appropriated for reading will make all the difference between a cultivated and an uncultivated man. Many men in our country have been growing rich on margins. And many a wise man has before now become Croesus rich in intellectual wealth by utilizing his fragments of leisure. The catalogue is a long one of men deprived of outward advantages who have become intellectual millionaires by

knowing how to lay their hands on a muscle making book, and to avail themselves of a tallow candle. Books read in the intervals of toil have saved to the world some of the great spirits of history. We should probably have had no Abraham Lincoln if there had been no books accessible to him in those brief intervals between the day's hard labor and the hours of sleep. School and college were impossibilities, but a good book of history or of law and a few pine knots on the hearth did the work of college professors. Benjamin Franklin made himself the American Socrates by utilizing his odd moments in reading. Horace Greely and Elihu Burritt would have remained unknown country boys had they not formed this excellent habit of using fruitfully their odd moments. Many a poor boy by having his appetite for knowledge whetted in one of the alcoves of a library has become in good time an intellectual capitalist; and your public library will be an exception if it does not kindle the fire of inspiration in many a young soul which would have remained unevoked but for the appeal which these books will furnish. A soul undreaming of the power in latency within him comes in contact with the great thinkers of the world and he becomes himself a thinker and a force along some line of noble achievement. It is to the wise use of these margins of time to which I would call you. Keep a good strong book at your elbow for these odds and ends of time; if you do this it will make all the difference between two or three great books going into you every year you live and those books remaining unread and unknown. We spend our leisure in conver-

sation, but our conversation will be cheap and poor if we never read. Why a man will sacrifice his evenings in idle savorless talk at the store or the shop or wherever garrulous idlers herd; or why women will seek or tolerate the company of aimless chatterers for the purpose of having their leisure squandered when they could enrich their minds and elevate the level of their thinking and their living by reading, is a thing past our divining. Some of us here who are most in the companionship of books could surprise you with what we have been able to accomplish by working up these odds and ends of time. Some of us have read scores of books by reading but fifteen minutes a day at them, and if this library is leading some one who has not read extensively to devote his scraps of time to these immortal books that have stirred the intellectual inertia of the centuries, it will in the end make all the difference between a cultivated man and a man who accepts stark ignorance as an imagined fatality. The habit of absorbing three or four great books every year will go far toward making the gentleman or lady of the most real and genuine kind. And then the habit formed and adhered to, you will find yourself making leisure and cultivating new crops of odds and ends of time for your favorite book, you will find it possible as you now think it is not, to still the whirl of life's shuttles in order to find for yourself opportunity of self cultivation through companionship with books. We do not live by bread alone after all, and it is worth while to get away from the question of bread in sufficiency or excess to live more than all of us do in those higher arches

of the brain, and to remember as we well may that life has not borne its utmost fruits if it leaves us at that far frontier of a coming life with every thing to learn and with the most important things to do.

Then to this habit of reading, what shall be furnished? The question is sure to recur, what shall we read? And this is vital, for the books people care to read are going to determine culture and character. People are never better than the books they read habitually, and from choice. Their reading is indicative of the man. We form our opinions of people by the kind of reading they do. It was a noble speech of Erasmus who said, "when I have a little money I buy books; if there is any left I buy clothes." But it is important what books we buy and what books we care to read. Wise discrimination in selection is of the first importance or else like the sailors of Ulysses we may be cheated into taking bags of wind when we think we are getting sacks of treasure. For a useless and unprofitable book has by this lack of discrimination, crowded out a useful and profitable book. So that in book reading as in sport-manship it is safe and wise to make for the largest game. We do not care to shoot field mice when we can bring down the lordly moose or the agile graceful deer. We do not gather sandgrains when we can fill our sacks with gold and costly pearls.

Patrons of a well-selected library perhaps need less guarding against deception, since its shelves are supposed to be reserved for the great books of the world. And yet is a good rule to make, and a good habit to form,

to read only or chiefly the great books of the world. We should be as exclusive and guarded here as some of us are of our social connections. We do well to submit our minds mainly to the great books; to listen to the great teachers of the race; that choice company that have made good their unchallenged right to place in the world's Valhalla. There is no risk here if you take the deliberate verdict of mankind. The vast majority of books that issue from the press are left as drift wood on the shore; but there are others that like mighty ships keep in the deep channel and go full sail down the river of time, and for that reason, time is an important determinative factor. How long has that book been off the presses is a good question to ask and we are wise if we wait for the printer's ink to dry. Emerson said when a new book came out he read an old one. "Old wood to burn," is somebody's saying, "old wine to drink, old friends to trust; old books to read." New books are issuing from the press that would fill St. Paul's Cathedral to the dome with the yearly output, but is it worth while to spend time over last week's issue of the big publishing houses when you can read all the great and tried masters who deceive no one. You need not care for foothills when you can have Mt. Blanc or the Andes. Some of the books that went like wild fire, two or three years ago, nobody is reading now; while the old kings of the intellectual world are ruling their big empire right down the centuries. Read then chiefly, if not only, the great books of the world; the great poems, the great biographies, the great essays, the great dramas, the best works

of fiction, for the good is the enemy of the best, if it excludes the best. Therefore keep the cells of the brain for the best. A great history is worth the pains of slow and patient reading. A notable preacher in this country was accustomed to read Gibbon's *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* once every year. Great biographies should be studied if for no other reason than that they enable us to keep company with the greatest and noblest spirits of the world. The life of Arnold or of Johnson or of Scott or of Tennyson or of Gladstone puts one in touch with the best contemporary life of the period in which they live. Read also the best essays. It will put a new sky over your heads and a remoter horizon line about your life if you read thoroughly the essays of Bacon, of Addison, of Macaulay, of Carlyle and of Emerson. Read the best poetry, the works of the authors I have already mentioned and it will take away the taste for the fifth and tenth-rate productions of those who will never come so much as in sight of the mighty Olympus where these great immortals hold their peaceful and unchallenged court. And then read only the great works of fiction. And no where do the guards and danger signals need to be planted so thickly as here; for fiction has become the staple of the reading of a great and growing multitude; so that our libraries find their chief constituency in our fiction readers, till we are almost ready to believe that the intellect of the day is being swamped in the meshes of story reading. Believing as some of us do that "no noble generation of men and women have ever been or ever will be reared on fiction" and that to those whose

appetites have been jaded by piquant stories, the great realities of life and the great movements of the world will inevitably pall, it seems time to sound a note of warning. We certainly shall rear no great heroic figures, produce no heroic characters and raise up no great public citizens out of those whose staple reading is the popular fiction of the day.

And yet amidst this sea of froth and foam and whipped syllabub which comes from the press and in the presence of the influence of this enervating reading it must be acknowledged that really great works of fiction have noble offices to take. Mr. Gladstone thought that the battle of faith and unbelief is to be fought out on the field of romance. It is easily believed that certain great evils can be most effectually overthrown by the raking fires of these masked batteries, and that works of fiction will be in the future, as in exceptional instances in the past, a potent force for helpful and beneficent reform. Some such works have been written in our time and launched with telling force against some of the menacing evils of the world. But in our reading we had better not waste time in pure experimentation. We would do well to keep close to the great masters of fiction. Some cultured people do not think it time misspent to read Scott from cover to cover every year. There are many acknowledged masters that may be allowed to keep their grip upon you while the new sensations have their run and their final destination in the rubbish shutes. And at best we would not want to make fiction the staple of our reading but accept it as the thin layer of masonry be-

tween the thick blocks of granite and porphyry, since much fiction makes the dreamer, rather than the man of alertness and intellectual brawn and vigor. We use fiction to help us in the study of life and yet life itself is our real study. So most of all, read books that will help you to live. The test of a book is its influence on life. The books that inspire you to live buoyantly and strong ; that elevate your ideals, that purify your heart, that help you to find the higher uses of life ; the books that add definitely to your knowledge, and that increase your power to cope with the adversities of existence ; the books that make you optimistic and hopeful ; that help you to cast away distrust and doubt and enable you to live unselfishly and nobly and helpfully toward the world. These are the books to read.

And while you are using books to this end do not forget that there is one Book that towers above all others as a veritable Himalaya, the Book which has been the root out of which whole literatures have been evolved, and has given rise to the greatest thinking the human mind has ever done ; the book that beyond all others has taught men how to live and to die victoriously. You will find in it the greatest history, the loftiest philosophy and the highest reach of poetry to which the human mind has ever soared. The Book which Charles Dickens tells us is the "eternal Book for all the weary and the heavy laden, for all the wretched, fallen, neglected of this earth ; the story of Him who through the round of human life had sweet compassion for all the neglected of this earth ; the story of Him who had sweet compassion for, and in-

terest in its every stage, its every suffering, its every sorrow." The Book I may add that has beyond all others beside made men heroic and brave to do and endure ; which has made nations strong and races virile and individual character manly and saintly. The reading that starts from or leads up to this Book will be broadening, enlightening ; the library that leads up to this greatest of books will be beneficent in its influence and lasting in its benefits to the community in which it is planted.



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